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# IOWA and WAR

*Border Defense in Iowa  
During the Civil War*

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By Dan Albert Clark

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## EDITOR'S NOTE TO NUMBER TEN

During the Civil War the people of Iowa were not only called upon to do their full part in the struggle for the preservation of the Union, but they were also obliged to defend the borders of the State from possible invasion by enemies from the south and Indians from the northwest. A more extended account of border defense in Iowa will appear later in the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

*Editor*

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UNDER THE GENERAL TITLE OF "IOWA AND WAR" THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA UNDERTAKES TO ISSUE A SERIES OF SMALL PAMPHLETS DEALING WITH A VARIETY OF SUBJECTS RELATING TO MILITARY MATTERS CONNECTED WITH THE HISTORY OF IOWA.

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# IOWA and WAR

Edited by BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

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## BORDER DEFENSE IN IOWA DURING THE CIVIL WAR

By DAN ELBERT CLARK

If there was any indifference in Iowa to the crisis at the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, it was not due to the belief that the conflict was three thousand miles away. From the beginning there was danger that the soil of Iowa itself might be invaded — not by organized Confederate forces, to be sure, but by guerrilla bands from Missouri and by vengeful red men from the northwest. The story of Iowa's military accomplishments during the Civil War, therefore, is not complete until some account has been given of the vigorous measures which were taken

to protect the homes and firesides of Iowans against hostile attack.

No one realized the need for home defense more keenly than did Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood who, with no military experience whatsoever, now found himself confronted with the gigantic task of creating a military organization in a State wholly unprepared for war. He did not anticipate an invasion of Iowa by regular troops from Missouri. "But lawless, reckless men within her limits", he said in his special message to the legislature on May 16th, "may take advantage of the unsettled condition of public affairs, to organize a system of border warfare for the purpose of plunder". The danger of Indian raids on the northwestern frontier was even more imminent, in his estimation, and he urged the General Assembly to make adequate provision for defense.

The story of how the borders of Iowa were successfully defended, under the guidance of Governor Kirkwood and the aids appointed by him, is not without interest, even though it is less dramatic than the record of the ex-

plots of Iowa men on the battlefields of the South.

#### DEFENSE OF THE SOUTHERN BORDER

“Impress on your people the necessity of good order on their part towards Missourians unless attacked”, wrote Governor Kirkwood to a resident of southern Iowa soon after the outbreak of the war, when disquieting reports had come from the border. “Act only on the defensive until an attack is made. Should any outbreak occur notify me at once.” At the same time he urged that companies of “minute men” should be organized in all the southern counties, with such arms as were to be found, and that these companies should hold themselves in readiness to respond to a call on short notice. “This is not what I would like to do”, he said, “or what perhaps is the best thing could be done if we had arms but is the best thing can be done now.”

In a letter to a citizen of Missouri a few days later the Governor declared that if there were hostilities between the people of Mis-

souri and the people of Iowa they must be begun by the former. But, he added, "if we are attacked we will take what we deem the best means of defense even if that should be to carry the war across our border into Missouri."

About the middle of May, 1861, Governor Kirkwood appointed John Edwards of Chariton and Cyrus Bussey of Bloomfield as special aids, with large discretionary powers, to organize means of preserving tranquillity in the border counties. They were to investigate the situation carefully and take measures for the raising of companies for home defense all along the Missouri border. "I was well satisfied the peace of our State would be more easily preserved by preventing invasion than by repelling it," said the Governor later in describing his activities to the legislature, "and therefore while I could not order our State troops beyond our State line, I instructed Colonels Edwards and Bussey, and through them the troops under their command, that if at any time the loyal men of Northern Missouri were in peril and

called upon them for assistance, they had as full authority as I could give them to lead their men into Missouri to the aid of the loyal men there, and my promise upon their return that my power should be used to the utmost extent to protect them, if called in question for so doing."

As a matter of fact Iowa men did cross over into Missouri on several occasions during the summer of 1861. Late in July, for instance, John Edwards reported that "at least 1,500 citizens of Iowa left their harvest fields and families and rushed into Missouri to the relief of the Union men. These citizens were armed in every conceivable manner, without officers, system, or drill." Edwards also reported that several men in southern Iowa "not only fed hundreds of Missouri citizens and their horses daily, for over a week at a time, but spent hundreds of dollars, sometimes their last dollar, in this benevolent manner. On account of the excitement and constant alarm along the border our citizens lost much valuable time by frequent hurrying to arms; therefore a vast amount of grain was lost on the fields."

Early in August several companies of Iowa men participated in the successful defense of the town of Athens in northeastern Missouri on the Des Moines River. Later, when Saint Joseph was captured by the Confederates fully twelve hundred Iowa men went to the assistance of Union men in Missouri. "This has excited against our people and State a bitter dislike on the part of the rebel forces and their leaders," wrote Governor Kirkwood to President Lincoln, "and their threats of vengeance have been violent and frequent. A battle lost at this time by General Fremont would lay all our southern border open to devastation and plunder by the victors, and while we have strong trust that success and not defeat awaits us, the probability of a different result naturally excites alarm."

In order to be ready for any emergency Governor Kirkwood appointed men in the counties along the southern border to organize all the able-bodied men into companies and regiments for home protection. "As you are aware," he wrote in a circular letter



to the officers thus appointed, "the State is not properly armed, nor can arms be had at present by the State. Under these circumstances you will require every man in your county having private arms to report the number and kind of arms he has. Double-barreled shotguns and hunting rifles, although not the best, are good arms in the hands of brave men." The companies thus raised were to be employed only in home defense. Each man was required to furnish his own clothing and equipment and his own horse, in case the company was mounted. The men were to hold themselves in readiness to be called into service at a moment's notice.

Fortunately, because of Union successes the time soon came when all danger from invasion by organized Confederate forces from Missouri was removed. But bands of guerrillas infested the region throughout the war, and no section of the border was safe from the raids of these outlaws bent on horse-stealing, plunder, and murder.

In October, 1864, for instance, a band of

fifteen or twenty guerrillas entered Davis County. It is claimed that they were led by Quantrill, the most blood-thirsty of all border ruffians. Entering the county near the southeast corner they proceeded westward, stealing horses and murdering peaceful citizens. The sudden appearance of this band of desperadoes in Iowa caused great consternation along the border. The news of the raid spread rapidly and the seriousness of the situation was so magnified that the startled settlers heard rumors that General Price's army was about to invade the State. Militia officers rode through the country calling the members of their companies to assemble at the appointed places of rendezvous. But it was soon learned that there was no need for their services: the outlaws had left the State as suddenly as they had entered it.

Although there were rumors and alarms and constant danger in southern Iowa throughout the war, the peace was not often disturbed by hostile raiders from Missouri. Haphazard and unsystematic though the measures of home defense may often have

been, they served the purpose for which they were intended. Using the means at hand, the pioneers made the best of a bad situation and saved Iowa from more than an occasional touch of border warfare.

#### DEFENSE OF THE NORTHWESTERN FRONTIER

A danger equally imminent and more to be dreaded threatened the scattered settlements in northwestern Iowa. Fresh in the minds of many of the settlers was the memory of the terrible massacre which had been committed by Sioux Indians in 1857 on the shores of Lake Okoboji — a massacre which had resulted neither in punishment for the Indians nor protection for the settlers against further attacks by the red men. And so at the outbreak of the Civil War there was great apprehension along the frontier, especially when it was learned that the troops had been withdrawn from the forts on the upper Missouri River.

Even before the firing on Fort Sumter the Governor had urged the War Department to send a supply of arms and ammunition to

Iowa for use in case of a possible Indian invasion. Upon the outbreak of war he redoubled his efforts. But the Secretary of War either underestimated the danger or he had very little knowledge of the geography of Iowa.

“I am daily receiving letters from our northwestern frontier expressing alarm on account of the Indians”, wrote Kirkwood on April 29th, after several previous letters had failed to bring results. “Our people there are very uneasy, and have in my judgment good cause for fear. I don’t ask for anything but arms, accoutrements, and ammunition. We have plenty of men willing to use them in our own defense and that of the government. If no arrangement has been made for arms for this State, do, for God’s sake, send us some. We should have at least 5,000 beyond those required to arm the troops of the United States”.

“It is not intended to order the State troops from the West at present,” wrote Secretary Cameron to Kirkwood on the same day, “and they will therefore be on hand to

meet any want occasioned by the removal of the U. S. forces.”

“A glance at the map of Iowa”, was Kirkwood’s reply, “will show you that the troops raised in this State will at Keokuk be at least 300 miles from the nearest point (Council Bluffs), and 400 miles from the point (Sioux City) most exposed to Indian depredations. This will not afford any protection to the northwestern frontier. All I ask is arms and ammunition; not any men.” And once more he reiterated the story of the Spirit Lake massacre.

Even yet the hard pressed authorities at Washington seemed unappreciative of the situation in Iowa. “I can now only say”, wrote Secretary Cameron on May 6th, “that the Chief of Ordnance advises that 1,000 stand of arms ought to be forwarded to Keokuk . . . to be used in case of an emergency.”

By this time Governor Kirkwood’s stock of patience was nearly exhausted. “In reply”, he wrote, “I can only say that if by this it is intended that the arms shall remain in Keokuk until an attack is actually made by

Indians, and then be used to repel such attack, such arrangement will not be of practical benefit. Keokuk is at least 300 miles from Council Bluffs, and nearly or quite 400 miles from Sioux City, in which region the Indians will be troublesome if at all. Between Keokuk and either of these points there are only 80 miles of railroad, and the balance of the way arms, etc., must be carried by wagon. The Indians might invade our State, do incalculable injury, and be gone beyond our reach long before an express could reach Keokuk and the arms be taken to the point of attack.”

Meanwhile, preparations for defense were not postponed on account of the Governor's inability to secure a prompt supply of arms. Early in May it was reported that the people in the western counties were “waking up to the importance of organizing home guards.” In order to give direction to this work of preparedness the Governor appointed Caleb Baldwin of Council Bluffs and A. W. Hubbard of Sioux City as his aids. Companies of mounted men were organized, with orders

to hold themselves in readiness for quick marches to any scene of threatened danger. Such arms and ammunition as could be found were collected and forwarded to Council Bluffs and Sioux City.

These measures of defense were not inaugurated any too soon. Early in July there came reports that Sioux Indians were committing depredations along the Little Sioux River near Smithland — a village which had been visited by Inkpaduta and his band shortly before the Spirit Lake massacre in 1857. Since the first of April, it was said, more than thirty horses had been stolen at Smithland, Correctionville, Ida Grove, and other points in the northwest. Mounted riflemen from Sioux City routed a band of Indians in a small skirmish, and it was hoped that the frontier would be rid of the marauding red men.

Scarcely more than a week had elapsed, however, before two farmers were murdered by the Indians while at work in the fields not more than two miles from Sioux City. The news of this tragedy caused great alarm.

The Sioux City company immediately set out in pursuit of the murderers who had a start of about twenty hours. Even as far away as Des Moines authority was given to John Mitchell to raise a company of forty mounted men and proceed at once to the frontier. The instructions were received on Saturday afternoon and by Monday the necessary number of men had been enrolled and the company was ready to march. Simultaneously the requisite number of short rifles, cavalry pistols, and camp equipments was sent from Council Bluffs to Sioux City to be in readiness for the men upon their arrival at the latter place.

Apparently the murderers were not apprehended, but throughout the fall companies of mounted men were stationed in the danger zone between Sioux City and Spirit Lake. About the middle of August the War Department empowered Governor Kirkwood to raise a company of regular cavalry for the defense of the northwestern frontier of Iowa.

The members of this company, recruited largely at Sioux City, were mustered into United States service for a period of three



years, and were on the same footing as the men who served in the Union armies in the South. At about the same time the Governor was informed that "1,000 Sharpe's carbines, 1,000 Colt's pistols, and 1,000 cavalry sabres, together with accoutrements and ammunition" had been ordered from the United States Arsenal at New York for use in the protection of the Indian frontier in this State.

These measures had the effect of checking Indian depredations and of producing a feeling of security among the settlers in the northwest. Throughout the remaining months of 1861 and the first half of the year 1862 there was comparative quiet on the frontier, with only an occasional rumor of Indian invasion.

Then in the summer of 1862 all northwestern Iowa was thrown into a fever of excitement. This time there was genuine cause for alarm. The Sioux tribesmen in Minnesota and the Dakotas had long nursed a feeling of deep resentment against their Great Father and his white children because of real and fancied wrongs received during

years of treaty-making and government dealings. When would there ever be a better opportunity to secure revenge than now when the white men were engaged in a life and death struggle among themselves? Besides the summer of 1862 found many bands of the Sioux almost on the verge of starvation and consumed with rage because their annuities, which should have been paid when the grass grew green in the spring, had not yet been distributed to them.

Thus it was that the murder of five settlers on August 17th by a wandering party of Sioux hunters was the spark which kindled a great conflagration. Under the leadership of Little Crow the redskins took up the hatchet along the entire Minnesota frontier. At New Ulm and at other points not far above the northern boundary of Iowa in the next few days they perpetrated the bloodiest massacre in American history. The estimates of the number of white victims vary from five hundred to fifteen hundred, but the most careful count places the number at more than six hundred and fifty.

It is small wonder, then, that there was terror throughout the settlements in north-western Iowa. Nor is it any cause for surprise that the settlers fled from their homes by the hundreds. When Lieutenant Colonel H. C. Nutt went from Council Bluffs to Sioux City, he found the road south of the latter place "lined with families leaving, and in such terror as to preclude getting any reliable information. They were all bound to get away from the Indians." At Sioux City he found a large portion of the settlers from southeastern Dakota. Most of them had departed from their homes in great haste, and in many instances had left all their possessions and live-stock, to say nothing of their unharvested crops. Many settlers from Woodbury, Ida, and Sac counties in this State had also rushed to Sioux City for safety. Similar scenes were being enacted at other points along the frontier.

This was a situation which demanded prompt action. As was the case at the time of the Spirit Lake massacre, the seriousness of the danger was not immediately appreciat-

ed. But when the truth became definitely known Governor Kirkwood and other military authorities were not slow to act. On August 29th the Governor ordered Schuyler R. Ingham of Des Moines to proceed at once to Fort Dodge and other points in the northwest. "Use the arms, ammunition and money placed at your disposal in such manner as your judgment may dictate as best to promote the object in view, to-wit: the protection of the inhabitants of the frontier", were the Governor's instructions to his newly appointed aid. "Use your discretion in all things, and exercise any power I could exercise if I were present." At about the same time three companies of troops who expected soon to be mustered into United States service at Camp Dodge in Council Bluffs were rushed to Sioux City, where they found preparations for defense under way.

Fortunately the General Assembly had already been called to meet in special session on September 3rd. More adequate provision for defense could therefore be made without much delay. The first law passed by the leg-

islature at this session was one authorizing and requiring the Governor to raise a volunteer force of mounted men for the protection of the frontier. On the same day a joint resolution was adopted urgently requesting the Secretary of War to take vigorous steps to chastise the Indians who had committed the massacres in Minnesota.

By virtue of the new authority conferred on him, Governor Kirkwood ordered S. R. Ingham to raise and muster into service five companies of not less than forty nor more than eighty men each: one at Sioux City, one at Denison, one at Fort Dodge, one at Webster City, and one which had already been organized and stationed at Chain Lakes and Estherville. These orders were faithfully carried out and there was thus created a body of men which became known as the Northern Iowa Border Brigade.

One company was stationed at Chain Lakes and another at Estherville, while the remaining companies were divided into detachments located at Ocheyedan, Peterson, Cherokee, Sac City, Correctionville, Little Sioux, Mel-

bourne, and other points in the threatened region. These, together with the Sioux City cavalry company part of which was stationed at Sioux City and part at Spirit Lake, constituted a chain of garrisons which extended entirely across the northwestern corner of the State from Sioux City to Chain Lakes. Furthermore, at Correctionville, Cherokee, Peterson, Estherville, Spirit Lake, and Iowa Lake, there were constructed blockhouses, surrounded by stockades, which might serve as places of refuge for the settlers in case of an Indian attack.

Of all these frontier fortifications apparently the most extensive was Fort Defiance at Estherville, built by a company under Captain William H. Ingham. The stockade of this "fort" was built of planks four inches thick and enclosed an area which was about one hundred and thirty feet square. At one corner and extending six feet beyond the stockade were the barracks, "a building fifty-two feet in length, eighteen feet in width, made of timbers eight inches thick". The office and commissary room at another corner

was a building fourteen by thirty-two feet in dimensions, built in much the same manner as the barracks. The entire south side of the enclosure was formed by a barn, the sides of which were covered with boards an inch thick, while the ends were built of four-inch planks. The exposed side of the barn was protected by "a sod wall, five feet at its base and two feet wide on top, seven and one-half feet high". Within the stockade were a guard-house, a well furnishing "an abundance of excellent water", and a flag-staff.

The preparations for defense at other points were less elaborate but equally well adapted to repel an Indian attack. The block-houses and officers' quarters at Peterson, for instance, were built of oak and ash timbers ten inches square, with roofs of soft maple boards. The stockade was constructed of timbers six inches square. In each case the stockade surrounded an area large enough to accommodate a considerable number of settlers with their live-stock and wagons.

These preparations for defense had the desired effect. Not once did the Indians in-

vade Iowa during this great uprising which left such a trail of death and devastation in Minnesota. Settlers soon began to return to their abandoned homes and a feeling of confidence was restored. This time the Federal government took energetic measures to punish the hostile Indians, and they were so decisively defeated that they did not again seriously menace the tranquillity of the Iowa frontier. The companies of the Northern Iowa Border Brigade were disbanded before many months had passed and their places were taken by United States troops. Although as late as January, 1864, Governor Kirkwood urged that means of protection be maintained, the period of serious danger had passed and the problem of frontier defense in Iowa had ceased to worry either the military authorities or the settlers.

D. E. C.



## NOTES ON BORDER DEFENSE

At the special session of 1862 the General Assembly passed a law requiring the Governor "to raise a volunteer force in the State of Iowa, from the County of Wapello and each of the Counties in the southern tier of Counties bordering on the State of Missouri, not less than one Company of mounted men . . . for the protection of the Southern border." This law was repealed at the regular session of the legislature in 1864, at which time every person in Iowa subject to perform military duty, who was not at that time in the service, was required to enroll in some company of militia. In other words, it was the purpose of this law to effect a complete organization of the militia of Iowa—a plan which of course superseded the necessity of maintaining special border defense companies in the southern counties.

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The defenseless condition of the Indian frontier in northwestern Iowa had been a matter of grave concern to the Governors of Iowa, as well as to the settlers, for many years before the outbreak of the Civil War. The establishment of Fort Dodge in 1850 encouraged settlement in that region and kept the Indians in check. But after that fort was abandoned in 1853 the frontier in Iowa was left without protection. Governor Grimes and Governor Lowe both used every means in their power to secure action by the War Department, but without success. Even after the Spirit Lake massacre of 1857 the authorities at Washington failed

to appreciate the danger which threatened the settlers in northwestern Iowa. The State did what it could with limited resources and inadequate military equipment to keep mounted rangers on the frontier or in readiness to be called on short notice. In this way the Indians were kept in check, until they became emboldened by the disturbed condition of affairs at the outbreak of the Civil War.

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